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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0763
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0639
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 2943
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1216
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001196

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, ECA, DRL
DOE FOR LANA EKIMOFF/KAY THOMPSON

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ALBUQUERQUE-ASHGABAT SISTER CITY PROGRAM ILLUSTRATES
"TURNED PAGE"

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11. (U) SUMMARY: Representatives of Albuquerque's Sister City Foundation found their visit to be productive, and more significantly a major step forward in their relationship with the Ashgabat Mayor's office. The delegation attended multiple Independence Day events and conducted successful outreach, both through interviews on state TV and through their home stays and charitable activity. Overall, this trip proved to be more successful than in years past. The group's access to a school for the disabled, meetings with city officials, and the positive media coverage it received are all signs that Turkmenistan is continuing to become more comfortable in its relationship with the United States and other countries. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The October 25-30 visit of seven members of the Albuquerque Sister Cities Foundation to Ashgabat included several veteran members of the city's overall sister city program, as well as members of the Albuquerque-Ashgabat committee. Host government authorities, particularly city of Ashgabat officials, enthusiastically endorsed the delegation's request to attend Independence Day events and took a much more active role in supporting the sister city relationship.

POSITIVE STEPS IN THE OFFICIAL CITY GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP

13. (SBU) The major highlight of the trip was a lengthy and successful meeting with Ashgabat Mayor Deryageldy Orazov on October 29, which included two recent International Visitors Leadership Program alumni: the first deputy mayor who is the mayor's international relations department head, as well as the deputy mayor for economic issues (NOTE: All four participants of the recent IVLP program were enthusiastic about urban issues upon their return and looked forward to expanding their contact with U.S. cities. END

NOTE.) Both sides offered multiple suggestions for expanding the relationship between the two cities, with Ashgabat officials focusing on gaining Albuquerque's support for construction projects and cultural and sports exchanges between the cities. Albuquerque focused on some specifics, including exchanges with a growing Albuquerque film industry or the University of New Mexico. They also suggested dedicating a park in each city to the sister relationship. Although the two sides made no concrete agreements, the overall attitude and optimism of the meeting was in strong contrast to previous attempts by Albuquerque to develop the relationship.

POSITIVE OUTREACH ON TV

14. (U) At many of the Independence Day events, state news media highlighted the presence of the Albuquerque delegation. Several members gave interviews about their hopes for a closer relationship between the two cities and for the future.

OPTIMISTIC VISIT TO A NON-SHOWCASE LOCALE

15. (SBU) In addition, local authorities permitted the delegation to visit an Ashgabat school for visually and hearing-impaired children to donate school supplies. In the past, the government was reluctant to allow access to such a facility for official visitors or allow a donation.

HOST FAMILIES AS THE ONLY CONTINUITY

16. (SBU) Although the overall sister city relationship appeared to have expanded with this visit, the many families who have hosted each other during visits to both cities make up the core of the relationship. Many families that have been hosts since the early 1990s were able to reconnect with their exchange visitors during this visit. Most felt strongly that this visit by the Albuquerque delegation represented a concrete and positive step in moving the program forward.

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SURPRISING QUESTIONS FROM STUDENTS AT TURKMEN STATE

17. (U) Turkmenistan State University Students in the English and International Relations Department hosted the delegation for rather frank and open discussions. The trend of students becoming bolder in their questions locally reached a new peak. Some students asked the Albuquerque delegation how Americans defend their human rights and how could people in Turkmenistan defend theirs. Another asked what the delegation members do when they disagree with their government's policies. The delegation members' varied replies to the same questions demonstrated tolerance and diversity in approaching sensitive issues.

18. (U) COMMENT: The Albuquerque delegation's official meeting with the Mayor of Ashgabat and deputies who participated in a recent IVLP program was the clearest sign yet of official support for the sister city relationship. The group's access to a school for the disabled, along with the positive media coverage are signs that Turkmenistan is continuing to become more comfortable in its relationship with the United States and other countries. END COMMENT.

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